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THE STRATEGIC PLANNING OF EVENT DESIGN

There is a specific rhythm or flow that must be incorporated into event design and there is a reason behind every choice from food to program elements. Subtle tactical action is brought into play as well as strategic thinking. Mastering event design becomes an art form. Planners who apply strategic planning to their event design process have discovered a method that successfully works to elevate event planning to a new level. Strategic planning is one of the secret ingredients that leads to producing outstanding events that meet the expectations of both clients and guests.

Event planners using the psychology of strategic planning are skillfully wrapping their events in subtle layers of event planning elements (known as inclusions) that have been designed to evoke specific responses from attendees. They are staged for effect to accomplish specific goals, which for the event planner is to produce an event that meets all of the client's objectives. A company's objective is what they are looking to achieve by holding an event. Objectives can be internal or external. The client's internal objectives are company mandated. The client's external objectives, which may never be formally verbalized, are clearly visible to event planners who have mastered the art of the psychology of event design.

Psychology is the study of mind and behavior. Behavior can generally be predicted, so creating the right set of conditions can bring about a desired result. For example, in business management classes, students are taught that if they want a meeting to end they merely stand up. The predictable behavior that follows that action is that others in the room will stand up as well. If they want someone to leave their office, they move towards the door and the others will follow. It can be that simple and effective. That sequence of events is played out successfully repeatedly in business offices around the world. It is an automatic response to the action taken.

Of course, those who attended the same training sessions may choose to remain seated to play out their hand, but they would be fully aware that the intended outcome of the act of the person standing up and moving towards the door was a subtle signal that the meeting had come to its conclusion, and it was time to leave.

Strategic event design follows the same principles—there is an intention, an action and a predictable response. This is a valuable tool to use when creating an event to produce the results desired by the client. Events that are strategically designed work with the best interests of the client and their guests in mind at all times. They are built to achieve intended results that will benefit both the client and guest alike.

EXTERNAL OBJECTIVES

External objectives are the clients' secret wishes. Were they hoping for a match between the selected destination and what brings them personal pleasure? One company president, who is an avid golfer, only chooses destinations that allow him to indulge in his favorite sport. Planners who have not noticed this have wasted time and money on preparing proposals that will never be selected no matter how perfect the destination may be, unless it also includes great golfing. Another president loved watersports—scuba diving, sailing, water-skiing—so, any inland destination did not stand a chance. One president did not like New Orleans. It is a fabulous destination that is perfect for a bilingual group that is active, fun loving, likes to shop and explore. It was a perfect match for the group's client history and profile but it wasn't a match for the president's tastes. In fact, it wasn't his dislike of the town itself, but the fact that he had a sister who lived there, and he visited her frequently. So, given the choice of a new destination he was not familiar with, it won every time.

Look for the common denominator in past history. It can provide major clues. Some clients have a company policy requiring a minimum of three destinations from three different suppliers. The deck can be stacked against a destination without the event planner being aware if they are not in tune with the questions that need to be asked. Better to present three dynamite destinations that address all—internal and external—objectives and position yourself for their next event as well as the two following that.

The president may not be the final decision maker. If spouses or partners are attending do not underestimate the influence or input that the executive partners will have. Again, look to the past history for clues. Where did they go before? Did they look for prime shopping meccas? Was it the theater or the arts that seemed to beckon? What type of destination did they travel to—city, resort, fun and sun, heritage—and look for the common element in all of them. Some companies go back and forth, alternating between fun and sun one year and history the next. The patterns can tip you off as well as the destinations. Examine carefully if what is being said matches what has been done in the past. Find out if there have been any changes to management and make sure you know who the decision makers are. Make it a point to find out why the past destinations were chosen. What was their appeal? Ask questions.

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Never make gender assumptions when it comes to personal pursuits that people are passionate about. A woman—whether she is the official corporate decision maker or spouse/partner—may be the biggest World Wide Wrestling fan or into extreme adventure sports. And a male counterpart could be the one who thinks taking the group to Las Vegas and seeing Céline Dion's new special effects-filled production at Caesars Palace would be the ideal choice for the group—combining gambling and golf with music and a spectacular show.

Think strategically, not only about event design, but in all areas of your business. Strategic design is meaningless if it is focused on the wrong destination. Combining strategic thinking with strategic design leads to producing successful proposals and special events.

INTERNAL OBJECTIVES

The purpose of an event planning proposal meeting is for the event planner to come away with a clear understanding of the company objectives as well the event elements, guest demographics, budget and past history. Event planners cannot begin to construct an event without knowing the conditions the foundation is to be built on. The “client” may be the company itself and the event planner may either be in-house, from an event planning company, a supplier (such as in the case of a client working directly with a hotel) or an incentive house.

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In the case of a corporate client contracting the services of an event planning company or incentive house to handle their event planning requirements, it is imperative that suppliers recognize the event planning company or incentive house as their “client.” All communication takes place directly between the supplier and the company the client has contracted to work on their behalf. The supplier in that case would not be dealing directly with the event planner’s client on a day-to-day basis.

The “given” objective to any client will be to produce a quality event within a set budget, and company objectives can include:

- Launching a new product
- Creating a corporate team environment
- Celebrating sales success
- Creating an opportunity for employees to be updated and interface with one another
- Holding a company wide brainstorming session
- Hosting an award presentation celebration

The event planner’s role is to create the conditions in which these events will occur under the client’s event and budget guidelines. The ways and the means that they are executed successfully is where strategic event design comes in.

How each event element is presented will achieve a different outcome. Take the example of a cocktail reception where guests are

gathered together for a stand-alone reception or presentation or to take part in a predinner event. The components of a basic standard cocktail reception are bar beverages and some sort of food. Optional enhancements to a basic standard cocktail reception could include background music and decor.

The bar drinks can be either dispensed by waitstaff or guests can help themselves at the bar. Food will either be dry snacks; an assortment of hors d'oeuvres passed by waitstaff and perhaps a cheese and fruit display table. Music is usually inoffensive and played quietly in the background. Nondescript floral arrangements may be included (Set out on the registration table or by the cheese and fruit display. However, it is never recommended to have them on the bar as they get in the way.).

We have all attended cocktail receptions that have been set out in this manner. Where early arrivals walk into a room devoid of any animation, stand around holding a drink in hand, looking and feeling awkward until more guests arrive. Guests then stand in tight little clusters, seldom moving from the spot they have staked out in the room until a welcome speech, after which they quickly disperse or the doors open for dinner and they go in and sit down. If they do venture from their spot, it is to go directly to the bar or the cheese table and quickly head back to the spot they vacated before it is filled.

On the event planning excitement scale this type of cocktail party would not even register a one. There is barely a ripple of energy in the room and this is the tone that the event planner has set for the rest of the evening. It becomes a ho hum affair, colorless, forgettable. One of countless others, an energy drainer. The only objective this cocktail reception will have met would be to serve as a gathering place for individuals to kill some time and to hold off hunger pangs before heading home after a short speech or sitting down for dinner.

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Guests going to an event after work will be arriving hungry. The basic cocktail rule is to feed guests so that they are not drinking on an empty stomach. They will be able to concentrate on the message that is being delivered during cocktails and/or not sitting down to dinner ravenous.

A step up from the basic cocktail reception is one that has been themed. The same basic elements will be in place but the bar drinks may be a little more exotic, the passed finger food will have a bit more novelty, the decor and floral arrangements may be more colorful and the music more intense. The energy level of the room will have been brightened. The guests' senses are starting to be addressed. Good vibrations will be felt in the room but there still is no movement or true animation in this setting. Guests may begin to move to the beat of the music while standing in place, conversations may move from the mundane—the weather and how busy it has been at the office—to something a little more upbeat in tempo. Guests looking for ways to enter into the conversation—especially if they are in an unfamiliar setting or group—can begin commenting on the food or the drinks, a safe topic and a way in which to break the ice. The stress relief felt around the room can actually be tangible. For the most part, guests are still firmly in place in their comfort zones, and intermingling is minimal, but for those who do set forth a means has been created to spark discussion. Guests heading into dinner will be more alert and responsive to the evening's events that are about to unfold. For some event planners accomplishing this—getting the audience warmed up—is where it stops.

This is where strategic event design comes in. Event planners must be skilled in this art, and they must approach the structuring of their cocktail reception with the intensity of a general directing their troops. They are on a mission and that is to turn the cocktail reception into an event element that will bring them one step closer to achieving their objective. To a strategic event designer even a cocktail reception is viewed as an opportunity to do so. Their cocktail receptions may be themed, but know that the theme will be wrapped in purpose—on purpose.

Strategic event planners begin by reviewing the group dynamics, which plays a big part in determining the style of event that is proposed. A cocktail reception designed for high-end stockbrokers or board of directors would be quite different in makeup than one for an active sales force, even if the client's corporate objectives were the same. Strategic event planners know this. The high-end senior executives are more likely to enjoy events where they are pampered with proven activities, whereas the active sales force prefers events that have a more competitive edge and are more adventurous.

The strategic event designer goes into the planning process clear on the client's objectives and the results they want to achieve. They know exactly who the client's intended targeted audience is. They are ready to move into their battle plan and map out their strategic points.

Their first step is looking at the big picture. An event can be a stand-alone or one that takes place over the course of a day or several days, and may be a meeting, conference, convention or incentive. Strategic event designers need to develop their principal plan of action for the event and look at how they can use the event as a vehicle to move them closer to their client's goal. Where a particular event element, such as a cocktail reception, is scheduled to take place is important in determining the event content. A welcome cocktail reception will be structured to produce different results than one that is scheduled to take place later in the week or one that is to act as the prelude to a farewell event. This applies to all event elements. Timing and overall structure play major roles in strategic event design.

Laying what is "known" out on a grid will create the shell from which the strategic event planner begins to work. Known elements are those outlined in the proposal request qualification meeting. The client may have said they would like to have daily meetings as part of their agenda, with a welcome cocktail party and dinner, as well as other program inclusions. The event planner will have been given the basic outline the client would like to see take place. For a seven-night meeting event elements could include:

- Round-trip transfers between the airport and the hotel
- Hotel accommodation
- Welcome room gift
- Welcome reception with a one hour open bar and hot and cold canapés to be followed by dinner with wine
- Private group breakfast daily
- Five full days of meetings with audiovisual, staging and lighting requirements
- One half day meeting to take place on the final day
- Morning and afternoon coffee breaks to consist of beverages and light snacks

- Private group lunch daily—no alcoholic beverages to be served
- One afternoon group recreational activity—team-building—to take place on the final day
- Private group dinner nightly with wine
- Farewell reception with a one hour open bar and canapés to be followed by dinner with wine

Event planners know the itinerary, the budget, the group demographics and dynamics, the client's objectives and the group's past event history. The elements as they are known are laid out on the day-by-day grid, which is then divided into sections (see Appendix for example). Each day has a square for breakfast, morning activities, lunch, afternoon activities, reception, dinner, and evening activities. The known event elements are then penciled into the appropriate section of the grid. For some event planners, it is merely a case of filling in the blanks and moving directly to telephoning suppliers to check availability and rates. What the client will receive is exactly what they requested. Will it meet the objectives? Not necessarily, unless the objectives were to simply move the office environment to another location with a few drinks thrown in. Requesting a half day team-building activity on the final day, however, suggests that team-building and creating company camaraderie is an objective—whether verbalized or not. A planner must be able to read what the program elements are telling them when they are laid out in the grid beyond what has been spoken or formalized in the written event outline.

In this case, the event outline is saying that they want to bring their guests together to relax and talk over dinner (and wine) every night at the end of their business day to create a mood of esprit de corps and fellowship, and to boost morale by including a team-building event.

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Event inclusions outlined by the client can be read like a book. They can tell an event planner volumes more than is ever said about what a client is truly seeking, but it is a matter of reading between the lines.

Once the grid has been filled in, it becomes a map from which event planners begin to break down the process of how they can achieve all of the client's objectives—the ones they have requested as well as the ones they may not be aware of. For example, the

minute an event planner skilled in strategic event design hears that a client requests a single team-building event at the end of a program, red flags will be going up. In their qualification meeting with their client, they will be able to address the problem of meeting the client's objective of bringing their staff closer together, if the team-building activity is left until the very end of the stay. The time to create a feeling of fellowship and companionship is at the beginning of the program not at the end, because you can use the week to build upon the initial activity.

The strategic event planner must clarify whether the client is really looking for a team-building event or merely one that will leave participants psyched up and ready to return to the work force. The two are very different. If the client is seriously interested in team-building, the strategic event planner can review options with them in the very early planning stages. And in order to best achieve these objectives, the event planner would review timing with them to see if the program format could be changed to allow for a half-day meeting, followed by a team-building activity to take place earlier in the program, one that can be designed around meeting content.

An example of a team-building event that could be tied to meeting content would be an adapted version of Geocaching. This high-tech game of hide and seek using global positioning systems (GPS) can be created with the clues tied into new company information or featuring new products. Another creative example, Reel Madness, is a team-building event (generously provided by Helen Schur Parris, CEO, Sunlinc Barbados) that is described in detail in the sample proposal located in the Appendix. The objective is to have the participants come together as a team at the beginning of their program and build upon that bond during the course of their stay.

A grand finale team event can then be incorporated into the program which will act as a means to send the work force back to the office psyched up and ready to go come Monday. Once it has been established with the client whether or not event flexibility can be factored in, the strategic event design process can begin.

Strategic event designers plan events that will achieve their client's objectives. Each aspect of the event elements is looked at with an eye on how they can best contribute to the event's success. Each event element is targeted to address specific areas and each one is layered one on top of the other, leading the event forward and contributing to meeting the event's goals. The grid in the hands of strategic event designers becomes a tool they can use—a

blueprint—on which to lay out the inclusions that will build a successful event.

A strategic event designer uses a grid to map out the event elements and to sketch the event energy. Balancing an event's energy is one of the secrets of producing a successful event and it is an essential component that is often overlooked by planners. The event inclusions must be carefully selected, and the event planner must know exactly when and where to bring each in to obtain maximum effect. Strategic event planners carefully construct and orchestrate their events. They understand the study of cause and effect. The client's intention—to meet their objective—and the actions they can bring into play to create a response that will work towards that goal is the strategic event designer's primary focus.

In the above example, the cocktail receptions, the dinners, and even the coffee breaks can all be designed to foster team spirit. Every activity can play a pivotal role but before development can begin the structure and energy of the event must be reviewed. Budget will limit what you can do and what can be included but it does not factor into event structure and event energy.

An event planner is being brought in for their expertise. If the event planner was to follow their client's outline—without recommending changes or coming up with alternate solutions such as moving the team building event to the front of the week for best results—they are not providing their client with the benefit of their experience. The first question a strategic event designer would ask themselves when reviewing the proposed event is how can I structure everything so that the client's objectives can be met in an environment whereby participants are:

- intermingling and getting to know one another;
- working hard through the day;
- coming away from the meetings with new information;
- learning to come together as a team;
- having the chance to relax at dinner and discuss new ideas and;
- returning to work anxious to put all they have learned to practice?

What event elements need to be in place to be right on target and to make their meeting meaningful and memorable?

Bringing any group together for a week and keeping them together 16 or more hours a day is going to be wearing on anyone,

especially when you couple that with the intensity of learning new information. If all breakfasts, lunches and dinners are planned as private group events and held in the hotel, in addition to being together during the meeting and coffee breaks, the participants are going to feel a need to have some breathing room to break away from the group. This claustrophobic feeling will be compounded if the hotel or resort is out of the way. Participants may begin to believe that there is no way to escape and they are on top of one another. Instead of pulling people together, an event like this could push them apart. Too much togetherness can have a negative effect. But there are ways to structure a program so that the group is still together for the most part but feels as if they have been given some breathing room or personal space.

Grid: Based on Original Client Outline for Company XYZ

Day One:	Arrival Welcome Cocktail and Dinner
Day 2 to Day 6:	Private Group Breakfast (Held in a private room exclusive to group) Morning Meeting Morning Coffee Break Morning Meeting Continues Private Group Lunch Afternoon Meeting Afternoon Coffee Break Afternoon Meeting Continues Private Group Dinner
Day 6:	Private Group Breakfast Morning Meeting Morning Coffee Break Morning Meeting Continues Private Group Lunch Team-Building Event Farewell Reception Farewell Dinner
Day 7:	Private Breakfast Return transfer to the airport

Even the act of filling in this grid should clue the event planner into a sense of energy being drained. A strategic event designer will look at how best to structure the energy, have participants intermingling and add mix to the event elements. Some of the things they would take into consideration are discussed next.

DAY ONE CLIENT ITINERARY

- The guests have been up, traveling all day.
- They will have been seated on the aircraft and again on the transfer shuttle over to the hotel.
- They are arriving at the hotel mid-afternoon and need time to unpack, relax, stretch, take a walk and explore the hotel.
- They will be meeting together as a group for the first time at the cocktail reception. Not all of the participants know one another.
- Dinner will follow cocktails

STRATEGIC EVENT DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Day One:

- The guests have been traveling all day and will be tired.
- They are getting in early enough to take some time for themselves and be refreshed before meeting for cocktails.
- Cocktails and dinner should be held in the hotel the first night. They have traveled all day and the last thing they will want to do is to be put on another shuttle and be moved to another location. Some guests will be adjusting to time changes. They will need the flexibility of being able to excuse themselves after dinner to go to bed early so they can wake up rested and ready to go for the morning meeting.
- An icebreaker will be needed at the cocktail reception, as this is the first time many of the guests will be meeting one another. The food and beverage service needs to be laid out in a manner that will invite intermingling.

An icebreaker is something that takes place at the beginning of an event and is designed to relax a stressful situation and to ease conversation. One “ice” breaker—in the true sense of the word—involves greeting arriving guests with a welcome drink served in

individual shot glasses made of real ice. At approximately 50 cents per ice shot glass (plus shipping and handling) what appears to be extravagant is anything but in terms of cost—and is guaranteed to open the door to conversation.

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Make sure to have plenty of waitstaff circulating continuously to assist guests with their empty ice shot glasses. You want to avoid having empty ice shot glasses set down, melting and creating a water hazard. You will also want to incorporate paper cocktail napkins into the presentation so that guest's fingertips are not chilled.

Another icebreaker for a high-end group is the “ice luge” which can be set up by bar staff. As the martini slides down the intricately carved luge path it becomes chilled before it reaches the guest's waiting glass—not shaken or stirred—but sliding open the door to conversation.

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The aim is to get the delegates fully into the room as opposed to having them stand around the entrance perimeter or positioning themselves by the bar. The bar must be set up well inside the room to draw guests further into the area as well as giving them an object of conversation. To create movement, the strategic planner would not have beverages served by waiters, thus forcing participants to go to the bar themselves. It is, of course, essential to have stations in various locations in the room. By making the participants go to the bar, moving across the room, it gives them the opportunity to greet others on the way and to strike up conversations at the bar. Similarly, the food is not passed on trays but is located at food stations, which have been deliberately set up with different items as opposed to having the same selections available at each location. This again leads the guests to have a reason to move around the room meeting new people.

The room now has energy. Guests are intermixing by design and by purpose. The atmosphere is one of movement and life instead of being stagnant and still. Stagnant and still could easily

have been the result had care and consideration not gone into the intention of the cocktail reception and the reception deliberately staged to bring about action and response. Providing a topic of conversation and having had the drinks and food play a part by the manner in which they were set up and served was step one in designing an event that will meet your client's objectives.

Dinner is a chance to introduce people to more of their associates. The guests have enjoyed cocktails. They have been talking and mixing with one another. The doors open for dinner. What needs to be determined now is how best to serve and set up dinner. Left to their own devices, guests will seat themselves with those who are with them as they enter the room. Depending on how the rest of the program—not just the dinner—is structured this may be fine. It will give the guests time to get to know one another and start to relax and feel comfortable in their surroundings. What has been removed is the stress of having to introduce themselves to new people.

If the event planner wanted the guests feeling at ease with their new companions but still wanted added chances to meet fellow workers, they could recommend that the welcome dinner be a buffet which would get the guests up and interacting again. Or perhaps just a dessert table and specialty coffee bar could be set up to entice delegates to be up and about at the end of a served sit-down dinner. Setting up an over-the-top dessert display again gives guests a safe topic with which to strike up conversation. If the client has specific people that they would like to get to know each other, designated seating with placecards would accomplish this. In this manner a guest could have met associates during cocktails, been seated with new people at dinner and have the opportunity to meet even more attendees on the way to dessert and coffee. Setting up a specialty coffee bar, designed to have guests standing in line for a moment, once again creates a chance to chitchat and provides an easy topic of conversation with which to break the ice.

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Make sure that you assign staff to oversee the dining room while guests are enjoying cocktails. Guests have been known to slip into the dining area on the pretense of leaving their cameras, purses and other items on their assigned chairs during cocktails and surreptitiously make adjustments to the seating plan. If possible, keep the doors to the dining room closed until you are ready to have guests enter.

DAY TWO CLIENT ITINERARY

- Breakfast
- Full Day of Meetings
- Coffee Breaks
- Lunch
- Dinner

STRATEGIC EVENT DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

The guests will be together all day in meetings, at coffee breaks, lunch and dinner. The first day of meetings will be intense. Breakfast should have no agenda and can be set up as an open seating buffet. Guests are free to come at their leisure between 6:30 and 8:00 a.m. That will give those who will be waking early adjusting to time changes a place to go to, have a cup of coffee, meet other early risers and walk the grounds if they choose. For guests who are at their best hitting the gym first, there is still time to work out, shower and have breakfast before going into the meeting room. The guests will have a sense of having personal time, space and choice and aside from the time restriction, they are not regimented in any way. There is no additional cost to food service/menu. The waitstaff will refresh the buffet as required.

Having breakfast designated as a buffet enhances the guests' feeling of having choice. The buffet will be set up two-sided so that there are no service delays due to long lineups, and this arrangement also allows guests to make comments to others beside them and across from them, doubling the chance of meeting new people. Coffee and tea will be served at the table for convenience and to allow guests to relax, chat, enjoy a leisurely breakfast and continue conversations without interruption once seated. Event planning staff can be stationed at the meeting room doors to direct delegates to sit on the right or the left making sure to split up groups of people arriving together. What is key in breaking down barriers is to continue to have people mixing and not allow them to get too comfortably settled in a cosy clique or provide opportunities for guests to continually shy away from meeting new people.

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Look at how the meeting is structured. Will the associates be seated in one spot throughout the day? Will there be no breakouts taking place in the meeting—with participants moving into smaller groups—or will they be stationary for most of the day? Knowing how the meeting is structured will allow planners to choose the appropriate coffee breaks and lunch elements.

At break time guests will need to take that opportunity to stand and stretch. The refreshments need to be selected with an eye to keeping energy and concentration high. Similarly, the room temperature needs to be set at an optimal level that is not too hot promoting drowsiness, or too cold prompting distress. The food served and the room temperature play an important factor in maintaining attentiveness and having the guests fully alert.

An excellent example of the type of good refreshments to serve at break time can be found in Sandy Lane's Health Break selection:

HEALTH BREAK

Assorted Yogurt Cups

Granola Bars

Power Bars

Trail Mix

Sliced Fresh Fruit

Energy Drink

Sparkling Mineral Waters

It is too time-consuming to do placecards at lunch when the focus is on getting back into the meeting so, if it is desirable to have the guests seated by departments (e.g., for a meeting where company representatives would be coming from across the country) an easy method would be to have each department assigned a different color and as the meeting breaks have the facilitator announce the colors—marketing please sit in the red section, accounting the blue and so on. Seating colors could be designated ahead of time and included in the guest's personal schedule if the company's agenda was to have different work sectors mixing. Hotels usually offer table linens in a selection of colors at no additional cost. This quick, visual solution for lunch seating arrangements allows guests to settle in quickly. The

guests will have been moved out of their comfort zone in the sense that they may not be eating lunch with the people they have been seated next to all morning in the meeting, but they will be able to meet new people and talk over meeting specifics with others who are in their same department.

At the afternoon break it is again an opportunity to stretch and move around. Depending on the meeting structure, the afternoon coffee break could be a time to grab a coffee, check in for messages, take a bathroom break and have everyone back in their chairs as fast as possible, or it could be turned into another opportunity to meet new people in a relaxed setting. Instead of standing in the hallway balancing a cup of coffee, guests could be requested to move into an adjoining room where a yoga instructor is waiting to take them through a series of easy stretches. Taking off their shoes, locating a position on a mat, and so on, are all designed to take people out of their comfort zone once again, start to loosen inhibitions, get them talking and laughing with one another and serve as a means to keep their attention and energy high. All executive staff must be prepared to take part by leading by example.

Refreshments served would be in keeping with the theme and could include bottled water with oxygen, orange slices, packages of trail mix and other healthy snacks. Be creative and make sure that you do not duplicate items from the selection offered during the morning break. It does not have to be yoga—for a group that loves golf set up a “tee break” and let the guests loosen up by practicing their swing with a pro. What strategic event designers look for are ways to shake up the expected but not in a way that will make guests anxious or uneasy. Complacency in an event can be an energy drainer.

A board of directors may prefer a more sophisticated coffee break and savor a more international selection such as the one provided by the Sandy Lane Hotel:

INTERNATIONAL COFFEE BREAK

Assortment of Freshly Brewed
Gourmet Coffees and Iced Coffee
Assorted Coffee Cakes
Biscotti
Cookies

The active sales force palates would be up for new experiences and tempted by something more unique for their afternoon repast. An example of this is from one of Sandy Lane's specialty breaks:

SIMPLY BAJAN

Freshly Brewed Coffee, Decaffeinated Coffee, Assorted Teas

Mini Turnovers, Coconut Bread and Sugar Cakes

Assortment of Fresh Local Fruit in Season

Chilled Coconut Water

Chilled Mauby

Last night the guests ate dinner as a group, and they have been together all day, so tonight it is time to do something different, still keeping them together but in smaller, more client targeted groups. Set this up so that the people you specifically want to meet one another have had the opportunity to do so, and have spent some quality time together.

At the end of the meeting guests could be advised that back in their guestrooms there would be an invitation to dinner. Dinner could take two different forms: on-site and off-site. If the hotel had a number of restaurants—reservations could be made for the different groups—they will still be dining in the hotel but in separate smaller groups. After dinner, guests may choose to meet up in the hotel bar for a nightcap before heading to bed.

The alternative to doing this would still be to break them into the smaller groups but take them off property to sample local cuisine and atmosphere. The cost would be higher due to adding transportation but the energy that comes back with the group is worth the added expense. They will be in the hotel for the majority of their stay and it would be good to be able to take them outside to experience a different environment.

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Remember that anytime an executive sits down with a group of their participants after hours there is the chance they will end up picking up the bar bill. Clients should prepare themselves for that eventuality and build a buffer into their program costs.

DAY THREE CLIENT ITINERARY

- Private Breakfast
- Full Day of Meetings
- Private Lunch
- Private Dinner

STRATEGIC EVENT DESIGNER CONSIDERATIONS

For the private breakfast leave the setup for breakfast the same throughout the group's stay. Breakfast is their breathing time when they can do things at their own pace. The feeling of having every moment controlled will lessen. Last night by dividing the participants up into smaller groups each got to experience something different. They may have met new people who they in turn will introduce to others they have already met. They all tried different restaurants, which gives them another conversational icebreaker talking about their experiences.

This would be the day—meeting content permitting—to look at having a half-day meeting. Have a group lunch and then have everyone take part in a team-building experience. A suggestion would be to have team color designated T-shirts delivered to each guestroom the night before with the request to wear them to the meeting the next day. Of course, the teams will be carefully chosen to ensure that people you want to connect are put together. Guests may know in advance that there will be a team event, but they will not know who they will be partnered with until they meet the next day. The colored T-shirts are used so that team members can easily identify one another, introduce themselves and have a chance to interact before heading into the meeting room.

For lunch guests are organized in their teams, giving them time to get to know one another. Lunch will be served to keep them seated with their fellow teammates.

The team-building activity—using an adapted game of Geocaching as an example—will be designed around meeting content. This will fulfill three objectives: including team-building elements in the program, increasing product knowledge and having guests spending quality time with a select group of people.

As mentioned earlier, Geocaching is a high-tech version of a scavenger hunt. It is played using GPS (Global Positioning System) and based on latitude and longitude coordinates. Players can pinpoint their location and seek out a specific spot where the next clue is hidden. The clues can be based on material from the morning meeting that will help to reinforce the message that was delivered. A correct answer will give participants the coordinates to locate the next clue/activity to do. Geocaching can involve multiple forms of transportation, for example, guests may be traveling by car and by foot (hiking to some hidden cache clues).

When the groups return they will be in high spirits. A suggestion for this evening would be to add an additional cocktail reception, that is a “clock in” activity. This serves several purposes: it allows planners to make sure that all guests have safely returned; participants are returning equipment and score cards to one central area, it becomes a gathering place to share experiences and lessens the likelihood of drinking along the route as the teams know that beverages will be provided at the end of the event. Include something that will spark conversation for example, provide instant cameras (and video cameras) to capture the afternoon’s activity and post the pictures on a corkboard at the cocktail reception. Guests will be passing around pictures and looking at the ones their colleagues have taken. The room will be alive with energy and animated conversation.

The cocktail reception should lead into an appropriate casual on-site dinner such as a barbecue. Guests will have been out and about all afternoon, and you don’t want to move them again by taking them off property unless there was a very special reason to do so. Dinner would be kept casual to keep the momentum going. You don’t want to lose the energy you have created by having guests returning to their room to change for dinner. You want the exuberance to continue as they move into dinner straight from the cocktail reception. If the guests were to go to their rooms and return, the atmosphere would be totally changed.

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When you have a competitive sales group together be prepared for anything and choose your challenges carefully. One group’s scavenger hunt mission included bringing back a photo of a very specific bird nest that could be found easily in the surrounding area. One team rented a plane to produce an award-winning bird’s-eye view of the nest—the competition was that intense and they became that creative.

An alternate suggestion to holding the clock in party at the hotel would be to have it at a private restaurant. Guests would drop off their vehicles at this point, enjoy cocktails and dinner and then be transported as a group back to the hotel by motorcoach if they had been driving themselves. If drivers had been hired (as opposed to having the teams driving themselves) they could be contracted to stay until the end of the evening or upon arrival at the restaurant the drivers would return the cars and motorcoaches would shuttle guests back to the hotel.

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An upscale version of Geocaching could be done by limousine and end up at the yacht club or a private country club for drinks and dinner.

An option for programs where meetings are not scheduled the next day would be to schedule free time after dinner. Guests would be free to enjoy the local nightclubs and return to the hotel at their leisure by private motorcoach shuttle. It would provide the guests with the opportunity to enjoy a different side of Barbados. But what is most important to remember is to control the time of return—you want the guests to return at a reasonable hour so that they will be well-rested and attentive at the meeting the next day.

DAY FOUR CLIENT ITINERARY

- Private Breakfast
- Full Day of Meetings
- Coffee Breaks
- Private Lunch
- Private Dinner

STRATEGIC EVENT DESIGNER CONSIDERATIONS

The morning coffee break can be traditional. The group will have been out and about the day before. There would be no need to do anything other than a traditional coffee break at this time.

For lunch, open seating would be recommended. Everyone is free to sit where they want. It is time to foster the feeling of freedom and being at ease following their team-building day. They

have been pulled together numerous times in a variety of different methods. Dinner the evening prior was a buffet barbecue, breakfast was buffet so it would be a good balancing point to have a plated lunch served. Guests can just sit and relax.

The themed afternoon coffee break could take the energy up. A fun, lighthearted atmosphere can include creating your own sundaes or cookies and milk. This will add to a feeling of camaraderie.

For the board of directors, instead of them creating their own sundae break, the hotel planners could design an exotic sorbet tasting break instead. Sandy Lane offers an intriguing selection to choose from for their middle courses:

SORBET TASTING

Champagne & Grapefruit Sorbet

Orange & Persimmon Sorbet

Celery Sorbet

Passion Fruit Sorbet

Lime Sorbet

Lemon Grass Sorbet

Grapefruit & Campari Sorbet

Szechwan Pepper Sorbet

Tamarind Sorbet

Red Wine Sorbet

Green Tea Sorbet

Mango Rum Sorbet

Gin & Tonic Sorbet

Vodka & Lime Sorbet

Olive Oil & Lemon Sorbet

Chilli & Mango Sorbet

The active sales force would enjoy the competition of a make your own sundae bar, which could be complimented with a display of fresh-baked cookies and milk such as those offered by Sandy Lane.

FRESH BAKED COOKIE BREAK

Black and White Cookies

Oatmeal-Raisin Cookies

Chocolate Chip Cookies

Freshly Brewed Coffee and Decaffeinated Coffee

Assorted Teas

Chilled Milk

A suggestion for dinner this evening would be to give the guests a cash advance. Have the hospitality desk equipped with menus from select local restaurants and set up a round-trip shuttle to take guests to and from town. Guests are free to choose their own restaurant and sign up in advance (preregister) for a specific reservation time. Block space is being held at each restaurant. Those who wish to stay at the hotel to have dinner or kick back, enjoy the hotel's facilities or room service are free to do so. Others who just want to grab a quick bite and set out to explore the sights will have that opportunity. Groups will naturally form and guests will appreciate having some leisure time. Shuttle times need to have an early cutoff to ensure that everyone is back early enough for a good night's rest and to be in good form for the meeting the next morning.

DAY FIVE CLIENT ITINERARY

- Private Breakfast
- Full Day of Meetings
- Coffee Breaks
- Private Lunch
- Private Dinner

STRATEGIC EVENT DESIGNER CONSIDERATIONS

Breakfast will be the same buffet setup as on other mornings allowing guests to dine at leisure.

This will be a full day of meetings with meals and coffee breaks. Since everyone was out the night before and each has different adventures to share, standard coffee breaks will work. The energy will come from the conversations.

Lunch can be buffet setup. This will give the guests the chance to meet and chat with other participants on the way to and from the buffet.

Dinner this evening would be another good chance to dine either in the hotel or off property with the client selecting a new mix

of people they want delegates to interact with. The clients may want seasoned pros dining with company newcomers, bring people doing the same job in different regions together or have marketing and accounting get to know one another better and learn more about how each area works. There are many strategic reasons behind why it would benefit the company to have certain people spending quality time together by design. Meal functions provide opportunities that should not be missed and the value of designated dining (pre-chosen dinner companions) brought to the client's attention. Last night they played but tonight it is back to business.

DAY SIX CLIENT ITINERARY

- Private Breakfast
- Half Day of Meetings
- Private Lunch
- Cocktail Reception
- Farewell Dinner

STRATEGIC EVENT DESIGNER CONSIDERATIONS

Breakfast as before. Participants are at their leisure: it is a buffet set-up. Visiting different restaurants the night before with a different set of people opens the door for conversation and sharing of experiences.

This was the team-building afternoon as per the client's original request. The team-building event was moved to Day 3 to allow more time for teams to gel and get to know each other after the team-building event. Having a team-building event scheduled for the final day as opposed to earlier in the week doesn't allow maximum time for bonding, shared experiences and opening the door to easy conversation. Instead, recommend the meetings breaking early in the afternoon and working through the coffee break. This allows time for guests to do last minute shopping, return to their room and have time to pack, settle accounts before the farewell cocktail reception and dinner, as opposed to holding an event in the afternoon and going straight into cocktails and dinner.

The cocktail reception is the time to reflect on all that has gone on this past week and to bring back the lessons learned from the team-building event. Life-size reproductions from selected photographs from the team-building adventure are displayed around

the room. They bring the focus back to the challenging experiences they all shared and memories and camaraderie fill the room. There is no need for background music. It is used to provide a topic of conversation and to add atmosphere, but here music would be lost and could actually be a distraction. The life-size photos would provide a topic of conversation. You want the participants relaxed, laughing and talking about their shared experiences. This is their final farewell. Business cards will be exchanged. Guests will be making the rounds and saying their good-byes.

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At business meetings where participants are not accompanied by their partner or spouse, including a dance band for cocktails or after dinner is not an appropriate choice. There are forms of entertainment—such as a comedy or live entertainers—better suited for a business function where guests are attending on their own.

The doors open to dinner and guests are seated with their team-building crew. Dinner and dessert are served at the table. Following dinner, the company president delivers some closing remarks but before they are finished, the lights dim and on the screen is a montage compiled from all their photographs and videos set to music. At the conclusion of the film clip there is an award presentation to the top teams—along with some fun categories such as “the team that got lost the most” and honorable mentions—with medals and trophies given out to all. In one way or another each team and individual is a winner. The award ceremony ends the week on a high-energy note. Everyone is psyched up and ready to go back to work. All objectives have been successfully met.

DAY SEVEN CLIENT ITINERARY

- Private Breakfast
- Return Transfer to the Airport

STRATEGIC EVENT DESIGNER CONSIDERATIONS

Will any guest need an early transfer to the airport prior to staff being in to prepare breakfast? Arrange for continental breakfast set up in the breakfast room to be available for these guests. Assorted

juices in bottles, yogurt, breakfast breads and pastries, hot coffee and tea. Provide cups to go for any last minute guests so they can take their coffee or tea with them and napkins so that they can tuck a muffin in their carry-on. Meal service has been cut back in airports and on aircraft—make sure that guest's well-being is looked after from beginning to end. Don't overlook the last morning touches. The program doesn't end until they are back home and all their luggage is accounted for. Be prepared to assist them with locating lost luggage. Have extra baggage tags on hand for replacement of any that were lost or damaged on the flight down and for guest's on-site purchases.

Employing strategic event design for all events large or small is one of the secrets to successful special events. Analyze layouts, structure them so they are balanced and bring energy into the room. And with each event that you do, make sure that each element and target hits all of the senses: taste, touch, sight, smell, sound. Will the menu tantalize the guests' sense of taste? Will the textures used for table coverings, invitations, anything their hand meets feel like quality and be pleasant to the touch? What will the guests see—what visions are being created? What smells will they breathe in? What essences? What aromas? What will their ears detect? Will it be the sound of the tree frogs at night at an outdoor Caribbean event, the sound of palm leaves rustling or the surf breaking on the sand as they dine on an outdoor terrace overlooking the ocean under a dazzling display of stars? All of those props are provided free of charge provided you have researched and found the right location in which to hold your event. It is all a matter of structure and balance. Take events outside of the hotel ballroom when you can. Count nature as one of your suppliers. Do not overlook it. Time cocktails to begin at sunset if possible at outdoor evening events.

Strategic planning can be used to meet all your client's internal and external objectives. Every event element becomes an opportunity to bring you closer to that goal. Find subtle ways to layer them one on top of the other. Looked at that way, a simple breakfast is no longer just that—it becomes an opening to be used for your client's benefit—look for ways to enhance the event. Something as simple as choosing to serve coconut bread in the tropics instead of traditional danishes can become an conversation ice breaker for a shy guest and moves you one step closer to one of your client's goals—to have employees get to know one another better. Each event becomes a well planned maneuver to take you the next step forward.